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SUBJECT: H5N1 CONFIRMED IN CROATIA: OVERVIEW OF
PREPAREDNESS

REF: ZAGREB 1436, 1729

11. SUMMARY: Croatian Veterinary authorities confirmed on October 26 the presence of the H5N1 virus in dead swans found in the eastern part of the country last week. The GOC has been rapid and transparent in its handling of the situation thus far. This message summarizes the situation to date, the GOC response and Embassy preparedness. END SUMMARY

H5N1 in Croatia

12. Croatian veterinary authorities detected the avian influenza virus H5 subtype in six dead swans found October 19 at the Grudnjak fish-breeding farm in eastern Croatia. The H5 subtype was subsequently identified on Monday, October 20 and Tuesday, October 21 in swans from two different locations several kilometers from the original site. Virus samples were sent to the EC reference laboratory for avian influenza in Weybridge, England for further testing and the results confirming the presence of H5N1 were received on October 26.

Control Measures

13. In reaction to the initial finding on October 19, the GOC implemented various safeguards including culling all poultry (approximately 17,000 poultry worth 200,000 USD) within 3 kilometers of the site where the dead swans were found; banning all sales of garden poultry (poultry not raised commercially and/or slaughtered in registered slaughterhouses); banning hunting of wild birds; increasing biosafety precautions including mandatory disinfection-baths near Grudnjak and disinfection of transport vehicles from production facilities to slaughterhouses nationwide.

14. In September 2005, the government established a committee to address the threat of avian and pandemic influenza chaired by Dr. Mate Brstilo, Assistant Minister, Veterinary Directorate, Ministry of Agriculture that includes representatives from the Institute of Public Health, Ministry of Health, the Veterinary Institute, the Ministry of Interior, and the Army. After meeting with Dr. Brstilo and his team on October 25 and 26, the Dutch agricultural counsellor reported that, in his

opinion, the Croatsians have the situation under control, but that several technical problems were identified. These problems include insufficient testing equipment, lack of expertise on AI epidemiology, and the need for software and information technology expertise for data analysis. The Netherlands plans to offer the GOC technical assistance to address these issues.

¶15. With respect to addressing the threat of pandemic influenza, the Croatian Preventative Health Headquarters (established in 2002 to deal with potential anthrax and SARS breakouts) prepared a draft National Pandemic Influenza Preparedness Plan (NPIPP). The plan was developed using guidelines and input from the WHO and EU. The GOC is currently reviewing the NPIPP.

Implications for the Poultry Export Market

¶16. On October 25, the European Commission voted to suspend the import of live poultry from Croatia but has not yet restricted imports of poultry meat and other poultry products. Croatian producers exported approximately 7000 tons of poultry products worth 18.5 million USD in 2004. This sector is one of the few sectors where Croatia enjoys a trade surplus. According to the Croatian Chamber of Economy, Prime Minister Sanader has promised that the government will buy poultry from producers should exports be suspended. According to a Croatian business daily, domestic poultry demand dropped by 40 percent in the days following the announcement that the H5 subtype had been found.

GOC and Media reaction

¶17. The GOC has been proactive in their handling of the case. The Ministry of Agriculture made the information public the same day they became aware that the H5 subtype had been found in Croatia. The Minister of Health, Neven Ljubicic, spoke to the press over the weekend to assure the public that while "the alarm about poultry is justified,... the alarm about people is exaggerated" and stressed that the government was engaged in all types of crisis preparedness including potential pandemics.

¶18. Avian flu has dominated the Croatian press since the announcement on Friday that swans in Croatia have been infected. Headlines and photos are sensationalistic, but reporting is largely factual. Avian flu has covered from three and nine pages in the most widely read dailies and is the leading story in all major Croatian newspapers and on all TV and radio news broadcasts.

Embassy preparedness

¶19. The DCM chaired a meeting of the Emergency Action Committee on Tuesday, October 25 to review the threat of avian influenza, discuss contingency planning and information outreach, and coordinate embassy interaction with the GOC. The Medical Unit has purchased stocks of antiviral medication (Tamiflu) on the economy and the RMO from Vienna will hold an AI information session with embassy personnel on Thursday, October 27.

Consular outreach

¶10. The Consular section has drafted a warden message to inform American citizens of the confirmation of H5N1 in Croatia and provide them

with the basic CDC guidelines and relevant website links regarding the virus. The warden message is currently in the clearance process.

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